

Piper cubeba

[Synonyms : *Cubeba officinalis*]

CUBEB is a climbing vine or shrub. Native to south-eastern Asia (particularly the Indonesian islands of Java, and Sumatra) it has insignificant flowers.

It is also known as *Cubebe* (Italian), *Cubeben pfeffer* (German), *Cubeben strauch* (German), *Cubeb pepper*, *Cubebs*, *Cubibe* (French), *Hab-el-ams* (Persian), *Java pepper*, *Kābab ah Chini* (Arabic), *Kabab Chini* (Arabic, Bengali, Hindi), *Kankole lada bar ekor* (Arabic), *Kebebe* (Turkish), *Kemukus* (Javanese, Malay), *Kubebenpfeffer* (German), *Kubeberpeppar* (Swedish), *Kubebo* (Esperanto), *Pepe a coda* (Italian), *Pfeffer* (German), *Poivre à queue* (French), *Rinu katenchar* (Sundanese), *Schwanzpfeffer* (German), *Stielpfeffer* (German), *Sujandha marichi* (Sanskrit), *Tailed cubebs*, and *Tailed pepper*.

The dried unripe fruit look like grey-black peppercorns (*Piper nigrum*) and have a taste similar to allspice (*Pimenta dioica*) ie. a combination of cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*).

Dried cubeb can be confused with other near relatives (*Piper*) and allspice (*Pimenta dioica*). Two-celled allspice is dark reddish brown, one-celled black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) is black and one-celled cubeb is grey.

Cubeba is an old name specific to this plant.

Little seems to be known so far of its earlier history apart from the fact that early on the Arabs recognized its source as the now Indonesian island of Java (although some authorities believe that the Arabs may have been confusing the fruit with similar-looking specimens eg. black peppercorns, *Piper nigrum*). Even today the berries can sometimes be adulterated with less superior cubeb relatives (*Piper*) or the unrelated allspice (*Pimenta dioica*).

Cubeb has fluctuated in the popularity stakes. In 1200 Java (now part of Indonesia) was trading the spice with China and harvesting it from wild plants,. It was sought after in Europe in the 13th Century for both medicinal and culinary purposes. Then by the end of the 17th Century when it was first traded from Malaysia as well it became an expensive rarity in the West. Western interest revived in 1815 when Army medical officers, serving in the Far East vouched for its efficacy for medicinal purposes – and cubeb then started to be cultivated commercially.

Today it provides a commercial ingredient for the perfumery industry, for the tobacco industry as a flavouring in some cigarettes, for the food industry and the drinks industry (the latter uses it as a flavouring in bitters).

Medicinally, it has been used in the past to treat some venereal diseases, and it is still used today for treating coughs, bronchitis, urinary disorders and dysentery, and also as a tonic for indigestion. The pharmaceutical industry uses cubeb in some medicinal preparations, particularly throat lozenges.